

Goethe's audience with Napoleon lasted almost a whole hour. I had accompanied him as far as the anteroom and waited there till he came out.

The Emperor was sitting at a large round table having breakfast, with Talleyrand standing on his right. He beckoned Goethe to come nearer, and after looking at him closely asked him how old he was. On learning that he was in his sixtieth year he expressed his astonishment to find him still looking so energetic, and passed immediately to the subject of Goethe's tragedies. He also assured him that he had read *The Sorrows of Werther* seven times and as evidence of this delivered an extremely penetrating analysis of the novel, claiming however that

he had observed certain passages which rather confusingly introduced the theme of thwarted ambition in the hero into the main story of his passionate love. "That is not realistic", he said, "and it weakens the reader's impression of the overpowering influence of love upon Werther. Why did you do that?"

Napoleon supported his point with further arguments which Goethe found so cogent and discerning that when talking about it to me later on he would often compare the Emperor's criticism to the professional opinion of a skilled tailor who soon discovers the cunningly concealed seam in an apparently seamless sleeve.

To the Emperor he replied that this criticism was quite new to him, but that he must acknowledge it to be perfectly justified.

Reverting to the subject of drama, Napoleon said: "Tragedy should be a school for rulers and their peoples; there is no higher achievement for a poet than that. You, for instance, ought to write a tragedy about the death of Caesar—one really worthy of the subject, a greater one than Voltaire's. That could be the finest task you ever undertook. You would have to show the world how Caesar would have been its benefactor, how everything would have turned out quite differently if he had been given time to carry out his magnificent plans. You must come to Paris; I absolutely insist on it. We have a larger view of things there! You will find abundant material there to inspire your works."

Each time he came to the end of anything he was saying he would add: "Qu'en dit Monsieur Goet?"

And when Goethe finally took his leave, the Emperor was heard to remark meaningfully to those standing by him: "Voilà un homme!"

For a long time Goethe kept everything that had been said during this audience a close secret, either because of his general characteristic reluctance to disclose important matters which concerned him personally, or for reasons of modesty and delicacy. But it was very quickly apparent that Napoleon's remarks had made a profound impression on him, although he contrived discreetly to avoid answering even Karl August's questions as to the content of the conversation. In particular the invitation to Paris gave him much food for thought for a considerable time. He more than once asked my opinion as to what would be the approximate cost of accepting it, and what the various necessary arrangements for him in Paris would be, how he should divide his time there and so forth. I rather think that later reflection

on the many discomforts which a stay in Paris would inevitably involve must have caused him to abandon the idea.

It was only long afterwards that he informed me of the details of the interview little by little, but not until eight years before his death could I induce him to make his still very laconic written record of it.

75. *Ch. M. de Talleyrand*

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Napoleon would sit long over breakfast : this was the time at which he liked to receive guests and talk. I have known several of these breakfasts last for over two hours. It was to them that he summoned the various important and distinguished men who had come to Erfurt to see him. Every morning he would read with satisfaction the list of new arrivals. As soon as he found Monsieur Goethe's name on it he sent for him.

"Monsieur Goethe, I am delighted to see you." "Sire, I see that when your Majesty is travelling, not even the humblest trifles escape your Majesty's notice." "I know that you are the leading tragic poet of Germany." "Sire, you do our country wrong : we think we have our share of great men : Schiller, Lessing and Wieland must be known to your Majesty." "I confess I know little about them; but I have read Schiller's *History of the Thirty Years War*, and I thought, if you will pardon my saying so, that any tragedies it might inspire would only be fit for our boulevards." "Sire, I am not acquainted with your boulevards; but it is there, I presume, that popular spectacles are given, and I am sorry to hear you judge one of the greatest geniuses of modern times so severely." "Your home is at Weimar; is that the place where the most famous men of letters in Germany meet?" "Sire, they enjoy considerable protection there." "I should be happy to see Monsieur Wieland." "If your Majesty will allow me to write and tell him so, I am sure he will come here at once." "While you are here you must go every evening to see what we are putting on at the theatre. It will do you no harm to see some good French tragedies acted." "Sire, I shall be very glad to go, and I must confess to your Majesty that it was my intention to do so; I have translated or rather imitated several French plays." "You are not as strict as we are in the rules of drama." "Sire, with us the three unities are not essential." "How do you like having us here?" "Sire, it is a very splendid visit, and one which we hope will be useful to our

country.” “Are your people happy?” “They have high hopes.” “Monsieur Goethe, you ought to stay here until the end of our tour and write something about your impressions of the magnificent show we are putting on for you.” “Ah, Sire, it would need the pen of some writer of antiquity to undertake such a task.” “Are you an admirer of Tacitus?” “Yes, Sire, very much so.” “Well, I am not, but we shall talk of that another time. Write and tell Monsieur Wieland to come here: I shall go to Weimar to return his visit, since the Duke has invited me there. I shall be happy to meet the Duchess; she is a remarkable woman. Monsieur Goethe, come to Racine’s *Iphigénie* this evening. It is a good play; not one of my favourites, to be sure, but the French think highly of it. You will see quite a number of crowned heads in my parterre. Have you met the Emperor of Russia yet?” “No, Sire, never, but I hope to be presented to him.” “He speaks your language well; if you write something about our interview at Erfurt you must dedicate it to him.”

I followed Monsieur Goethe and engaged him to come and dine with me. On returning I wrote down this first conversation, and during dinner, by putting various questions to him, I satisfied myself that my record of it is entirely accurate. After dinner Monsieur Goethe went to the theatre, and I took pains to secure him a seat near the stage.